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Ex-Contras Allege Cover-Up

Say CIA Behind Orders

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and Brian Donovan

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San Jose, Costa Rica — Two former contra leaders have accused the CIA of ordering a gruesome cover-up scheme that some Costa Ricans say apparently concealed several American deaths in the contra war.

The incident involves the crash three years ago of a U.S. government-owned cargo plane during a covert mission to supply a contra army operating in northern Costa Rica. All seven men aboard were apparently killed.

In interviews with Newsday, the former commander of that army, Eden Pastora, and his top lieutenant, Carol Prado, said that Central Intelligence Agency officials directed them to mutilate the corpses of the crash victims.

The CIA's orders, they said, included removing the jawbones and teeth of the dead men. "It was inhumane," said Pastora, who would not discuss the matter in detail.

He and Prado, however, did identify two CIA officials then stationed here — including the CIA station chief — who they said gave their group the order to mutilate the bodies.

Costa Rican authorities say that Pastora's guerrillas were the first to reach the wreckage of the DC-3, which crashed March 24, 1984, in the jungle a few miles from the Nicaraguan border. According to Costa Rican officials, the

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bodies were taken out of the plane and burned, some of them twice.

Most other physical evidence had been removed or destroyed by the time Costa Rican investigators arrived, and some bodies were removed from the crash scene by an unidentified helicopter, witnesses told Costa Rican police investigators.

The statements by Pastora and Prado — combined with new information from Angel Edmundo Solano, Costa Rica's security minister at the time of the crash — represent the strongest indication to date that American deaths in the Nicaraguan war have been covered up by the U.S. government.

Asked for comment, CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson in Washington said she would look into the matter. A day later, she said she could provide no specific information on the DC-3 crash, but added: "The CIA would not direct anyone to mutilate bodies in any plane crash. . . . That is not the way we do our job."

A Newsday investigation of the crash found that:

• Villagers who went to the crash scene told Costa Rican government investigators they saw bodies of men who looked like Americans before the burning took place, according to Solano, who was heading the inquiry at the time. "They said there were North Americans on the plane," Solano said.

• One of the few pieces of physical evidence apparently overlooked by the guerrillas, investigators said, were fragments of a child's letter and poem — written in English. The letter, they said, included part of a name, "Henrik."

• A socialist member of Costa Rica's congress, Sergio Erick Ardon, who notified authorities of the crash before it became public knowledge, told the Costa Rican press at the time that his contra sources said at least one American died.

• An American freelance journalist in Costa Rica, Martha Honey, said that Felipe Vidal, a Cuban-American who has led contra troops, told her in confidence that Americans had died in the crash. Congressional investigators have identified Vidal, who could not be reached for comment, as a CIA operative.

Solano left the security minister post a few months after the crash, served more than two years as Costa Rica's ambassador to Mexico and now practices law in San Jose, Costa Rica. He said he is still troubled by what he considers the inadequate investigation of the incident.

The burning of the corpses and destruction of other evidence before his investigators reached the scene made it impossible to determine who died, he said.

Nevertheless, there were unconfirmed reports in Costa Rica at the time that Americans may have died. La Prensa Libre, the newspaper whose reporters were the first journalists to find the crash site, reported that seven crew members died, four of them Americans. Other Costa Rican media, quoting local residents, put the American deaths at three to five.

In addition, there were reports that members of Costa Rica's rural guard, some of whom are contra sympathizers, may have helped in covering up the deaths. Costa Rican officials said at the time that an investigative report on the incident was being prepared, but it was never released. Calls to the minister of security were not returned.

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Prado, Pastora's former aide, said the plane's pilot was a friend of his, Renato Torrealba, a Nicaraguan married to an American. "He was the CIA's chief pilot at the time," Prado said. He said the plane "had a sophisticated air navigation system, but it crashed against a mountain. We believe it was a human mistake."

Prado and Pastora said CIA officials used pseudonyms in dealing with the contras. One CIA official who directed the cover-up, Prado said, was a South American who used the name Ivan Gomez. Pastora said another official involved was Gomez' boss, the CIA's Costa Rican station chief, who used the name Tomas Castillo.

"The agency sent out the order to send them the jaws and the teeth," Prado said. "They wanted Eden's people to burn the bodies and take away the jaws and teeth. The bodies were burned and later taken out of the country."

The former contra leaders declined to give any more details on what had happened and said they did not know of any dead Americans. They did not elaborate on who they thought the dead might be. Both men are living in Costa Rica, where former contras generally are sensitive about discussing any past violations of the country's neutrality laws forbidding all military activity.

The World War II-vintage DC-3 was painted with Canadian markings and serial number when it crashed, according to Costa Rican police.

A title report listed the most recent owner as an Indianapolis man named Robert Branch. But Charles Goodloe, an assistant U.S. attorney in Indianapolis, confirmed in an interview that the federal government took custody of the plane from Branch in July, 1983, because the craft had allegedly been used in drug deals.



Officials dug up a grave where plane crash victims were buried.

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